

Mansour Hashash and Sheikh Awad

Yvonne Neville-Rolfe's family collection includes a fine pencil portrait in profile of an old man with most distinctive features. Underneath is written in Arabic that this is Mansour el-Hashash, and in English is written El bab el Malek. The date is unknown but is likely to be c. 1830 when Bonomi says he was collecting his Topographical Notes for which Mansour el-Hashash appears to have been one source of his information. Some ten years ago I spent two days in Mrs Neville-Rolfe's cellar examining a trunk-full of diaries, letters and odd notes. (It was an appropriate subterranean repository for the personal papers of a man who had spent so long working and living in tombs). A loose page of this old Bonomi collection says that "Mansour Ashash was born in 1136" – 1723 in the Gregorian calendar. So we have a portrait of a Qurnawi who was fourteen when two of the earliest European visitors, Pococke and Norden, visited Thebes – perhaps he saw them. And we have further evidence of this centenarian, as Bonomi was not the only long standing resident to record this elderly Qurnawi. Giovanni d'Athenasi (Yanni) wrote in his book of 1836, "Both sexes live very commonly to the age of a hundred. I know one of the name of Mansour Elhassas, who was in his hundred and eighteenth year, and who walked extremely well, rode on horseback like a young man, and had extremely sharp sight. His son has been thirteen years in my service; he has been appointed primate of the village, his father-in-law having resigned that office." (D'Athenasi 1836: 133) There are many stories of the long-lived Qurnawi and recent medical research has confirmed that longevity does indeed run in families.

Mansour and his descendants, the wider Hashashiin family, lived in Horubat, on the north side of Sheikh abd el-Qurna, where they had a family zawyeh – a separate, community-owned building where the extended family could meet for social and religious events - now recorded on the display of the Zawaya of Qurna. By coincidence it was in this zawyeh that the exhibition about Qurna "Living Villages in the City of the Dead" was first put up in 1997 for Qurnawis to see and to use.

Knowledgeable elder Qurnawi today recount that Mansour el-Hashash was famous for knowing a great deal about the monuments and was given the 'title' Nasr by other Qurnawi, one that has stuck to the family to this day. Nasr is the title used for a head teacher, a man who knows a lot. Family members today, who have been shown the portrait, have been surprised to see the strong facial similarities between the earlier descendants of Mansour that they had known and Mansour as drawn by Bonomi. The phrase 'El bab el Malek' is unclear but may refer to where Bonomi was when he drew the portrait or possibly to Mansour's unofficial role as quasi-chief guardian.

Howard Carter wrote:

"Sheikh Mansûr el-Hashâsh by name, drolly remarked: "But forget ye not where horror is, there is fear, and fear is often more deadly than the venom of a snake!"

This venerable Sheikh was a time honoured notable of the village, especially among the frequenters of the coffee-hearth, even though, years gone by, he had been deposed by the Government for his conduct towards the taxpayer, whom he had held under the river, sometimes too long, to collect for the second time the annual land tax – once for the Pasha and once for himself. Sheikh Mansûr was, in fact, a sage of fame throughout the villages, and his droll utterance caused a silence on the part of all those present. During this pause he re-settled himself upon sandy Mother earth, dextrously sipped his steaming-hot coffee, and with pleasant gravity added: "Surely ye have heard tell of the quarrel between the Rat and the Snake?"

"No! But by the Reverence of your beard! Let us hear it!" Exclaimed the assemblage in one voice.

So smoothing down his beard, old Mansûr replies: "Then hearken to the following strange event!"

When silence reigned once more, Mansûr then began: "'Twas on one of midsummer's

days, when the heat of the sun, like molten lead, oppressed all life in the desert wâdis and tracts,

It is unusual for working-class or farming families anywhere to have portraits drawn of their early 18th and 19th century ancestors. It is also unusual for foreign artists of that time to draw portraits of local people and also give them a name and thus record their identity and history for posterity. Sometimes the visiting artist writes the place name, and more often 'a native', 'a farmer' or 'native girl carrying water' but almost never a personal name. However, such was the close relationship that longer-stay travellers and residents had with some Qurnawi, that Mansour el-Hashash was not the only elderly Qurnawi to have his portrait drawn – Nestor L'Hôte drew Sheikh Awad on his visit in 1828-30. Not only is there a drawn portrait of Awad but we also have a photo c. 1868 of the old Sheikh with his long pipe sitting on the hillside (Keimer 1955).

Sheikh Awad was a famous guide who lived in Horubat close to Yanni and Wilkinson and was over 99 when he died. Though not immediate family he was a 'cousin' of Mansour el-Hashash. In 1833 he was in charge of Wilkinson's House when Edward William Lane and a friend each paid him "15 piastres a month for his services." (Lane 1833) We know that he was employed by Lepsius and Brugsch and was Champollion's foreman on the west bank. Lepsius recounts in his letters that he was told by "my guide, the excellent old 'Auad," of a feud between the family of the Sheikh of Qurna - to which he belonged - and a family in Beyrat which had resulted in his getting beaten up in a recent affray. (Lepsius 1853 271, 321-322) The enmity between these two adjacent villages is mentioned time and again by travellers. Sonnini in the late 1770s is told by the Sheikh of Qurna to be careful of the people of Beyrat as they and the Qurnawi are at war; and this is some 75 years before Awad's family problems. Animosity between clans exists to the present day, as recounted by Van der Spek, though reasons for its cause vary.

There is a detailed discussion about Awad and his age by Ludwig Keimer in his article about the Theban Visitors' Book (*Cahiers d'histoire égyptienne*, December 1955). Awad told Franz Wallner in 1872 that he had been married ten or twelve times and had more than forty children. It is not surprising that when Qurna Discovery held a small party in 2001 to introduce Bonomi's great grand-daughter to the descendants of Bonomi's old friend Awad, we found that a large number of Horubat Qurnawi were descended from him. We made a small display about the two men and gave the senior descendants a certificate that included the portraits of both men, as a record of the day. The family portrait, the original now in archives in Paris, was back in the Qurna family via London, and new international friendships were started across the generations.